DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 081 115 EA 005 427

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TITLE Organizational Mechanisms for Conflict Management in a Large Urban School System.
PUB DATE Feb 73
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting (58th, New Orleans, Louisiana, February 26-March 1, 1973)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Administrative Organization; *Conflict Resolution; Occupational Information; Organization; School District Autonomy; *School Districts; *Superintendent Role; *Urban Schools

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses primarily on the office of the district superintendent, a position unique to large urban school systems. The popular assumption is that subdivisions administered by district boards and district superintendents make urban school systems more responsive to local communities. However, evidence is presented to substantiate the contention that, in fact, the purpose of such offices is to reduce or eliminate local conflicts and pressures before they reach central (administrative) offices (where all significant decisions are made.) The district superintendent is held to be an agent for maintenance of the status quo, not a force for change and responsiveness. (Author)

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"ORGANIZATIONAL MECHANISMS FOR CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN A LARGE URBAN SCHOOL SYSTEM"

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EA 005 427

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The office of the district superintendent in large urban school systems is intermediate between the central office and the schools. Generally a district superintendent oversees 30 to 40 schools in a distrinct geographical area of a city. During the past several years district superintendents have proliferated as courts and politicians responded to popular pressure by establishing district offices which could be responsive to neighborhood publics. The assumption has been that central offices are too removed from communities to be responsive to local pressures and that school principals do not have the power. A district office, on the other hand, is close enough to communities to hear and, in theory, powerful enough to bring about changes people want.

There have been district superintendents in Philadelphia for several decades and I would suspect that they provide a model for the way district superintendents function in cities around the country. It is my contention that although district superintendents are closer to the people than central office and do hear more, they are virtually powerless to respond to public pressure. They are in fact agents for the protection of the system and maintenance of the status quo. An examination of the office of district superintendent in Philadelphia demonstrates that it is unrealistic to expect them to be forces for change and responsiveness. Rather, their function is to work in a mediative role between conflicting interests in the school system. In that role, conflict manager, they play an important part in the affairs of the system.

Two conditions virtually guarantee a restricted role for the district superintendent. First, all major fiscal decisions are governed by the fact that city, state and federal revenues to the School District are received and distributed by the central office, generally with the restriction that there be equal expenditures per pupil in the operating budget across all districts. Second, contracts with employee organizations are centrally negotiated -- the teacher contract determines salaries, class size, and working conditions in all districts.

Power and Authority of the District Superintendent

In assessing the power and authority of any school organization position I look at three dimensions: control of budget, personnel, and curriculum. By these three criteria the office of the district superintendent has an extremely limited role in the conduct of school district business.

Budget

A district superintendent does not control the funding levels of schools in his district. Schools receive allocations for the number of personnel, amount of materials, amount of equipment they may purchase, etc. from the central office according to the grade level and number of students in the school. Certain funds in comparatively small amounts are given to district superintendents to fund special programs within their districts as for example, remedial reading programs. Generally this money is allocated in one of two ways: all schools in the district share it on a dollars per school or per pupil basis, or a representative committee is formed to review proposals and choose those deserving of funding. In neither instance, is there any direct decision by the district superintendent (or any concomitant risk to him).

Even in those rare situations where the district superintendent does control discretionary money, it is unheard of for him to withhold or withdraw funds for poor performance. A differential reward system would be likely to promote competition and conflict; an egalitarian reward system avoids conflict.

As has been implied, many centrally conceived programs are funded through the district office. Additionally, budgets for operating expenditures and purchase requests are received by the budget officer in the district office before being submitted to central office. These requirements give the illusion that the district office has control over budgets and expenditures and perhaps give illusory power to the district superintendent, but in fact the district budget activities are pro forma.

Personnel

A district superintendent has limited selection or placement powers except for his own immediate staff. At the secondary level principals are chosen by large committees of which the district superintendent is chairman; at the elementary level principals are selected by the district superintendent from a pool of those who have passed a centrally administered exam.

A district superintendent has the authority to rate all professional employees within his jurisdiction, including principals, supervisors, and teachers. But in the memory of the most experienced administrators in the system, no principal has ever been rated unsatisfactory. Similarly, a district superintendent will avoid an unsatisfactory rating of a teacher except in the most egregious circumstances; instead problem teachers are transferred to other districts in "player trades." As confirmation of the

Personnel (cont'd.)

district superintendent's lack of power, the grievance procedure in the teacher contract does not include district superintendents except in informal, voluntary roles.

A district superintendent's only real personnel power is in the assignment of substitute service and such support service as music teachers and psychologists. But again, most of these decisions are predetermined by established procedures.

Curriculum

No one except teachers has any real control over curriculum in Philadelphia. Even principals and supervisors are restricted to advisory roles.

One last indicator of the status of district superintendents is their salaries. Although they have impressive titles, in fact they are paid less than many senior high school principals in the system.

The question presents itself: What does a district office do that couldn't be done elsewhere? At first glance, the answer would seem to be -- very little. Central office could do all budget review, all attendance record processing, all bus scheduling, and so forth. Substitutes could be called by individual schools and individual schools could make requests for art or social studies supervisory service direct from central office. Monies spent for personnel located at district offices, roughly $750,000/district, could be apportioned among schools to use in purchasing services and to central office to pay for support services. (See Exhibit 1 for an innumeration of district office functions.)

THE DISTRICT OFFICE

What, then, are the "real" functions of district level management? How do district offices justify their being? From my view the district offices fulfill the following "needs" of the organization:

1. The district office is more personal and less forbidding than the central office. The district superintendent and his staff are more likely than central office staff to know principals, teachers, and parents in the district. Thus they are viewed by their client group as being more likely to provide requested services in the least possible time and with the highest quality. In addition, they are more likely than central office people to be aware of contingencies and aberrations at the school level and to make appropriate allowances in decision making.

2. The district office provides a layer of insulation between schools and central office. Thus, conflicts between parents and principals, teachers, and principals, etc. can be mediated by higher authority without involving central office (e.g. PFT building representative's monthly meetings with district superintendents). In addition pressures and conflicts between central office and schools can be mediated by the district superintendent and his staff. The end effect is to reduce the amount of time central office must devote to minor problems. Conversely, principals benefit by having requests and dictates from central office interpolated at the district level so that the extraneous is filtered out and the unreasonable mitigated.

3. The district office prevents information overload at the central office by synthesizing information from the 35 schools in the district before sending it on to central office.

THE ROLE OF THE DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT

The district superintendent's role in the organization is not to be critical of central office and not to participate in policy formation. Instead, the district superintendent, if he is performing his "real" functions, is a socio-emotional specialist skilled in conflict reduction and resolution. His attributes must include candor and sympathy in dealing with subordinates, an ability to investigate and define problems, and willingness to act to resolve problems once identified.

He is likely to be involved daily in the following sorts of problems:

1. Students at a junior high school are dismissed at 2:30 and are bothering students at several nearby elementary schools when they leave at 3:30.

2. A new middle school is opening to releave overcrowding at elementary and junior high schools in a particular community. It's in the middle of an active gang area and parents are reluctant to send their children.

3. Several parents have complained to the district office that the principal of their elementary school is paddling students in his office.

4. Central office has ordered a hiring freeze, yet several schools in the district are understaffed and are demanding more teachers.

5. A parent insists that her child be transferred to a different school because his lunch money and tokens are being taken from him each morning by students in his present school.

Dealing successfully with these sorts of concerns and pressures on a day-to-day basis requires primarily that district superintendents be highly skilled in interpersonal relations.

Central office, in contrast, requires two types of administrators - task specialists who provide efficient service to the organization (e.g.scheduling, payroll, purchasing) and tough-minded politicians who are willing to do constant battle in seeking resources from city, state, federal, and private sources and in distributing those resources internally.

Central office personnel err in criticizing district superintendents for not being more outspoken in dealing with such policy problems as evaluation and funding of Title I projects or budget reduction decisions. Recent experience gives evidence that district superintendents only question policy when that policy threatens their personal relationships with their subordinates; that is, the program budget process is opposed by district superintendents because of the hostility it would engender among principals, not because of the demands of the process itself.

A district superintendent does not want to be responsible for causing conflict, as he would if he refused to fund a given Title I project, eliminated the athletic program or suspended a principal in his district. He wants this sort of decision made at the central office so that he can ascribe blame to higher authority and system-wide policy. And this is in keeping with his role as mediator between groups with conflicting interests. When central office must make drastic decisions, then the district superintendent is the one who deals with and helps reduce hostility and frustration in the field. And he can not perform this function for the organization if he is "to blame" for the acts which provoked the hostility and frustration.

CONCLUSIONS

If the arguments I have made about the functions of district superintendents and district offices in the organization have substance, then several conclusions are warranted:

1. As long as the school unit remains the primary base for instruction, as long as there are system-wide contract agreements with employes, and as long as taxing power can not be decentralized to the school or district level, the organizational structure of the School District can not be expected to change significantly. There will continue to be a powerful central office responsible for policy decisions, and schools responsible for carrying out those policies. District offices, then, are likely to continue in approximately their present functions.

2. Decentralizing authority to district offices, especially on budget and other substantive policy matters, may in fact make the district offices less effective, not more effective. The more directly responsible the district superintendent is for policy decisions, the less effective he can be as mediator.

3. District superintendents should not be viewed as agents of change, but rather as agents for mitigating changes. In that role they can protect and support subordinates who are experimenting in ways viewed as worthwhile, they can implement centrally imposed changes in ways that do not cause such local distress that dissolution is the result, or they can opt to impede change sought from either above or below.

CONCLUSIONS (cont'd.)

4. Training for district superintendents should improve their ability to do what they really do (i.e. interpersonal problem solving) and not what they don't do (i.e. systems analysis, cost effectiveness).

5. Given the role and the personality characteristics of district superintendents as I have depicted them, it is quite likely that district offices are not "well-managed." One reason is that central office has conflicting expectations for the district superintendent - sometimes conflict resolver, sometimes policy maker. Another is that the personality traits and competencies of a good conflict resolver are not necessarily those of a good administrator. One could deduce that a good district superintendent rarely makes a good central office administrator.

Any large organization, and especially one that is so public and pervasive as a big city school system, is certain to experience frequent conflicts of wide ranging intensity between a variety of individual and group interests. The Office of District Superintendent in Philadelphia seems to have evolved in a way that makes it ideally suited to successful conflict management.

EXHIBIT 1

Functions of a District Office in the School District of Philadelphia

A. Control allocation of scarce resources:

- Staff development money
- Supervisors and collaborators
- Bus service
- Psychological service
- Research service; Planning service (if these positions exist)
- Art, PE, Speech, etc. specialist teachers

B. Operational matters:

- Monthly meetings with PFT Building representatives and with principals
- Bus scheduling
- Budget: review school requests; manage district office budget
- Attendance
- Substitute Service
- Review Teacher ratings, Student suspensions
- Pupil placement and transfer
- School feeder patterns

C. Oversee Special Programs - eg. Follow Through, Title VII Project, Reading Project, etc.

D. Community liaison - Home and School; District Advisory Council, Community groups, etc.